Ramadan

Motivating Believers to Action

An Interfaith Perspective

Edited by

Laleh Bakhtiar

DISCARDED
by the
Mead Public Library
Sheboygan, WI

Ramadan: Motivating Believers to Action

An Interfaith Perspective

Edited by

Laleh Bakhtiar

Foreword by

Seyyed Hossein Nasr

© THE INSTITUTE OF TRADITIONAL PSYCHOETHICS AND GUIDANCE, 1995

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the written permission of KAZI Publications.

Book Designer
Liaquat Ali

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Bakhtiar, Laleh
Ramadan: Motivating Believers to Action:
An Interfaith Perspective

Includes bibliographical references.
1. Islam, Practices. 2. Psychology, Religious.
I. Bakhtiar, Laleh. II. Title.
BL 53.U45 200'.1975.16302
ISBN: 0-934905-25-8

Published by:
The Institute for Traditional Psychoethics and Guidance

Distributed by:
KAZI Publications, Inc
3023 W. Belmont Avenue
Chicago IL 60618
Tel: 312-267-7001; FAX: 312-267-7002

759944

CONTENTS

FOREWORD: WHY DO MUSLIMS FAST v
Seyyed Hossein Nasr
INTRODUCTION ix
Laleh Bakhtiar

PART ONE: GOAL-SETTERS

1 THE GOAL OF PRESCRIBED FASTING 3
Syed Anwer Ali
2 THE MYSTERIES OF PRESCRIBED FASTING 11
Muhammad al-Ghazzali
3 SUFIS ON PRESCRIBED FASTING AND SPIRITUAL POVERTY 29
Javad Nurbakhsh

PART TWO: BELIEVERS

4 COMMENTARY: QURANIC VERSES PRESCRIBING FASTING 37
Abul Ala Mawdudi
5 THE VIRTUES OF RAMADAN SEEN THROUGH THE TRADITIONS 45
Muhammad Zakariyya Kandhlawi
6 PRESCRIBED FASTING AND THE MEDICINE OF THE PROPHET 59
Muhammad al-Akili

PART THREE: STRATEGISTS

7 STRATEGIES OF THE PRESCRIBED FAST 69
Pervez Hanif
8 PRESCRIBED FASTING
ACCORDING TO THE FIVE SCHOOLS OF ISLAMIC LAW 75
Muhammad Mughaniyyah
9 QURANIC COMMENTARY ON
"I ANSWER THE PRAYER..." (2:186) 93
Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i
10 THE QURAN AND ITS RECITATION DURING RAMADAN 105
Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i
11 REMEMBRANCE OF GOD 125

Munir Abu Salman

Part Four: Moral Healers

12 Moral Healing Through Fasting 141
Laleh Bakhtiar
13 Attachment to this World 147
Muhammad al-Ghazzali
14 On Spiritual Fasting 169
Muhyiddin Abdul Qadir Gilani

Part Five: Energizers

15 Therapeutics of Prescribed Fasting 175
Shahid Athar
16 Medical Benefits of Fasting 181
Ebrahim Kazim
17 Ramadan Recipes 211
Shabnam Zaman
18 Dreaming of Prescribed Fasting 217
Ibn Sirin

Part Six: Human Bonding

19 Ramadan and Interfaith Bonding 223
Shahid Athar
20 Fasting: An Historic Perspective 229
Muhammad Zafarkhan

Part Seven: Master Communicators

21 Utilizing Ramadan to Communicate 247
Tariq Butt
22 Special Night Prayer of Ramadan 251
Muhammad Aslam
23 Retreat to a Mosque 253
Muhammad Zakariyya Kandhlawi
24 The Night of Power 263
Seyyed Qutb
25 The Poor-due of Ramadan 271
Navid Hanif
26 The Festival Day: Suggestions for School Celebrations 277
Ismat Bano Siddiqi

Notes 279
Contributors 287

Foreword: Why Do Muslims Fast?

Seyyed Hossein Nasr

Certain truths are by nature evident and need not be discussed in normal circumstances. But, in a day and age when the most evident truths are shrouded by the clouds of doubts and questioned, one is forced to discuss even the most obvious of them. One such truth is the necessity for an ascetic element in human life. Without an element of self-denial and asceticism no religion and therefore no human culture is possible. One must withdraw occasionally from the full life of the senses even in order to be able to enjoy the fruit of sensual perception. As the Taoist saying affirms, it is the empty space of the wheel which makes the wheel. It is only a certain degree of restraint from the material objects of the senses that makes even the life of the senses balanced, not to speak of making possible an opening in the human soul for the spiritual life.

One such practice of restraint is fasting, promulgated in Islam as obligatory for the month of Ramadan and recommended for other periods of the year. As the Holy Quran asserts, it is a practice which existed in older religions and in Islam it was only revived and institutionalized in the form of the *sawm* of Ramadan. Fasting during this month possesses, of course, many social and external benefits and features which have been discussed often and in fact even somewhat overemphasized in

certain quarters, where the chief virtue of fasting is reduced to charity towards the poor. This element of charity is, of course, there but like all true charity it becomes spiritually significant only when it is directed towards God. And in fasting it is the obeying of the Divine Will which has as its fruit charity towards the poor and the needy and an actual participation in their hunger and thirst.

But the most difficult aspect of the fast is the edge of the sword of abstention directed toward the carnal soul, the *al-nafs al-ammarah* of the Holy Quran. In fasting, the rebellious tendencies of the carnal soul are gradually dampened and pacified through a systematic submission of these tendencies to the Divine Will, for at every moment of hunger the soul of the Muslim is reminded that it is in order to obey a Divine Command that the passions of the carnal soul go unheeded. That is also why the fast does not include only food but also abstention from every form of lust and carnal passion.

As a result of this systematic restraint, the human soul becomes aware that it is independent of its immediate natural environment and conscious that it is in this world but not of it. A person who fasts with complete faith becomes aware very rapidly that he is a pilgrim in this world and that he is created as a creature destined for a goal beyond this material existence. The world about him loses somewhat its materiality and gains an aspect of 'vacuity' and transparency which in the case of the contemplative Muslim leads directly to a contemplation of God in His creation.

The ephemeral and 'empty' nature of things is, moreover, compensated by the appearance of those very things as Divine gifts. Food and drink which are taken for granted throughout the year reveal themselves during the period of fasting more than ever as gifts of heaven (*ni'mah*) and gain a spiritual significance of a sacramental nature.

To fast is also to wear the armor of purity against the passions of the world. It is to incorporate even 'physically' in one's body the purity of death which is of course coupled with spiritual birth. In fasting, man is reminded that he has chosen the side of God over the world of passions. That is why the Holy

Prophet loved fasting so much. It was a basic element of that 'Muhammadan spiritual poverty' (*faqr*), about which he said, '*al-faqr fakhri*' (spiritual poverty is my glory).

This death of the passions cleanses the human soul and empties it of the putrid water of its negative psychic residues. The individual and through him the Islamic community is renovated through this rite and reminded of its moral and spiritual obligations and goals. That is why the arrival of the blessed month is greeted with joy. For in it the doors of heaven are opened further for the faithful and the Divine Compassion descends upon those who seek it. To have completed the fast of Ramadan is to have undergone a rejuvenation and rebirth which prepares each Muslim to face another year with determination to live and act according to the Divine Will. The fast also bestows a spiritual perfume upon the human soul whose fragrance can be perceived long after the period of abstinence has come to an end. It provides for the soul a source of energy upon which it feeds throughout the year. The holy month has therefore been called 'the blessed', *mubarak*, one in which the grace or *barakah* of God flows upon the Islamic community and rejuvenates its deepest sources of life and action.

INTRODUCTION

Laleh Bakhtiar

Motivating believers to action is based on seven key qualities which when consciously developed lead to positive action. Positive action in religious terms means doing what the Source wants them to do with their lives by submitting to God's Will.

These seven qualities, in turn, form a threefold process of how to learn to do exactly this—what nature has programmed the individual human being to do through conscious choice.

KNOWLEDGE, PROCESS, ACTION

The threefold method works through knowledge, process, action. Knowledge refers to knowledge of the outer world as well as of the inner workings of nature. Such knowledge in the traditional view leads to knowledge of the Source. This is confirmed by the well-known Tradition, "One who knows self, knows one's Lord."

This knowledge is then inwardly processed, placed within the alchemical oven, so to speak, for transformation. The result of the transformation, the proof of having transformed is through a third stage called action. Action towards the Source, towards self and towards others is proof of the extent or quali-

ty of transformation.

Knowledge incorporates two of the seven major qualities of a believer who is both responsible and committed—responsible for self and committed to the Source and fellow human beings. These two qualities are purpose or goal and belief. Process involves three of the seven characteristics, namely, strategy, moral values and energy. Having strategies makes it possible to realize one's goals and beliefs when they are based on moral values and receive the necessary energy to carry out these strategies. Action, proof of the strategies having worked, result in human bonding and mastering communication.

The essays in this collection are divided into these seven characteristics to show how a practice like prescribed fasting during the month of Ramadan can reinforce the motivations of a believer towards action.

In this sense, believers are of two types: those who practice prescribed fasting during the month of Ramadan and those who want to understand them, to observe what they do during this month and how and if it helps them become better human beings.

Goal-Setters

As goal-setters, believers have a consuming purpose that drives them to grow and to transform. The purpose in this case is to practice the prescribed fast for one month out of every year throughout their adult lifetime. Through this spiritual practice, as their goal, believers are invigorated and fueled by having meaning in their life. It mobilizes them to try to be all that they can be in the human sense which is ultimately the spiritual sense. They envision self through the model of the perfect human being—Muhammad ibn Abd Allah (ﷺ)—and surround themselves with people—relatives, friends, acquaintances—who share similar goals.

Syed Anwer Ali explains the goal, purpose, spiritual passion behind the prescribed fast. "The Goal of Prescribed Fasting," reflects on the goal of piety (*taqwa*), being God-fearing, guarding against wrongdoing. "The Mysteries of Prescribed Fasting"

by Muhammad al-Ghazzali has been a classic for almost 800 years. There are few writers who have exceeded his depth of understanding of the spiritual practice of prescribed fasting as well as other types of spiritual practice. A person who succeeded to what should today be considered a Secretary of the government left it all to become a Sufi because he realized that his breadth of knowledge was not being processed to lead to better action towards others. He left his position and turned to writing and mysticism. In this article, al-Ghazzali outlines the outer and inner duties of a person who has set the goal of fasting, the duties described being based on the *sunnah* or sayings and actions of the Messenger Muhammad (ص) as related by his Companions.

For the Sufi, the goal of piety is understood at the deepest level. This is called spiritual poverty and prescribed fasting is one of the best methods to attain it. Javad Nurbakhsh, the master of the Ni'matullahi order, has collected sayings of Sufis over the centuries on fasting and spiritual poverty.

Believers

After goal-setting, the second important aspect of outer and inner knowledge is belief. Belief encompasses a wide range of subcategories. For the religious believer, belief about what they are and what they can be determines who they will be. As they believe in a higher power to be the best possible understanding of the universe given the miraculous events of the past which cannot be scientifically explained in a conclusive manner, their belief supports their goal. The goal of piety and its quality of spiritual poverty expands the possibility of self attaining human perfection.

Abul Ala Mawdudi's "Commentary: Quranic Verses Prescribing Fasting" are based on knowledge of the Traditions recorded from the Messenger's Companions. This is the traditional method of commentary and explains the historic as well as the philosophic basis of the verses. Muhammad Zakariyya Kandhlawi goes deeper into the Traditions and relating to prescribed fasting in "The Virtues of Ramadan," commenting on

them from his wide base of traditional learning.

The Traditions have been compiled on various topics and one of the most important areas have been that of traditional medicine. Several of such compilations exist and one of the best among them is that of Imam Jawziyya. Muhammad al-Akili not only translated this but embedded the translation with modern equivalents. His article on prescribed fasting according to the Traditions on traditional medicine as compiled by Imam Jawziyya helps believers by reinforcing their knowledge of prescribed fasting. It was a practice initiated in its particular form of performance during the month of Ramadan by the Quran—revelation—and reinforced by the Messenger's actual practice of it (*sunnah*). Therefore, for a believer whose two main sources for knowledge are the Quran and the *sunnah*, this essay further confirms the belief that they can actually attain the goal by practicing the prescribed fast. Muhammad al-Akili further points out that prescribed fasting, on the one hand, and prayers and supplication, on the other, go hand in hand for spiritual transformation to occur.

Strategists

Moving, then, towards process, the goal-setting believer looks for strategies. With their resource being the self consisting of body, soul, spirit and center in what is called the heart—they want to learn what they need to do to organize this resource. How can they have their goal and belief achieve the greatest potential? What is the most effective way to use the resource of self and its subparts? The most effective strategy has always been modeling the behavior of others who have the same goal and the same belief. For the believer, this model is that of the Messenger Muhammad (ص) who was the perfect human being.

Strategies he used included performing the prescribed fast as well as prescribed prayer, supplication and continuous recitation of the revelation. In "Strategies for Prescribed Fasting," Pervez Hanif points these out. As he indicates, the

month of fasting is not just performing the prescribed fast, although this sets the stage for other strategies and spiritual practices which the remaining articles each relate to in one way or another.

For the believer, revelation brought both a Law and a Way. Both serve as strategies of how to approach life in the manner in which the model approached life. As the model did not always do things in exactly the same way, five schools of interpretation developed of the *sunnah* formulated in the Traditions. These five schools are the Hanafi, Hanbali, Shafi'i, Maliki and Jafari schools of law so called after the name of the person who founded them. They were all completed within 150 years after the death of the Messenger. In 1963, the head of al-Azhar university in Cairo, Shaykh Shaltut, issued an edict that all of these five schools are recognized schools of law and that any believer will be considered to have followed the *sunnah* if they follow any aspects of any of these five schools.

Whatever strategy is chosen—that of one particular school of law or cutting across the views, for the believer, it becomes an important part of goal-setting and belief to follow the strategy of prescribed fasting as recorded in the Divine Law. Herein lies the importance of the article by Muhammad Mughaniyyah and the reason for its inclusion in this compilation of essays.

As indicated by the Traditions on medicine, fasting will not have a psychological-spiritual effect unless it be accompanied by prescribed prayer and supplication. The remaining three articles emphasize their importance as a strategy for a believer to be able to process prescribed fasting. It is only when the process resulting from fasting and supplication are internalized that transformation in terms of actions will have a positive effect on the person who is performing the prescribed fast as well as those around him/her. Otherwise, as a Tradition points out, they will only receive hunger and thirst for their efforts.

While one example of Quranic commentary was included as reinforcement of the belief system, another by Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i, "Quranic Commentary on '*I answer the prayer...*' (2:186)," also a contemporary religious scholar, reinforces the strategy of supplication. Supplication is a daily strat-

egy of believers but it is of particular importance during the month of the prescribed fast and his commentary on a verse which falls between two verses prescribing fasting as a religious duty is most informative. It shows the importance of supplication while at the same time is proof of the wealth of traditional commentary where one verse out of the 6600± can receive so much attention and yet still not exhaust the possibilities of what it could mean.

The strategy of Quranic recitation is yet another form of spiritual discipline encouraged during the month of prescribed fasting. The Quran is traditionally divided into thirty parts so that the believer reads one part each night during this month. It is also an integral part of the special night prayer as pointed out by Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i, in his essay.

One of the verses of the Quran says, "Remember Me and I will remember you," making this form of supplication a very rich traditional strategy to attain spiritual energy. Munir Abu Salman points out the different prayers recorded in the Quran by prophets like Abraham, Ishmael, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad, peace be upon them all, as well as those of great women like Asiyah, the foster mother of Moses, wife of Pharaoh, the Queen of Sheba and Hannah, the mother of Mary and grandmother of Jesus, used in the remembrance of God.

Moral Healers

Strategies and the process of self transform only if they are accompanied by positive values and if they receive the necessary energies to be accomplished. Values are the fundamental moral and practical judgments a person makes about what is most important to them. They are specific beliefs about what is right and wrong. In the traditional view, the human being has the innate possibility to know right from wrong. The Quran speaks to this innate ability as a verse describes it as "a guidance and criterion." A person who performs the prescribed fast, while not believing that it is right, will develop inner conflict and this will undermine the attaining of the goal. Therefore,

recitation of the Quran as well as remembrance is reinforced during this month to further elucidate the values which lead to human perfection.

Psychologically goals are effected by beliefs—the more a person believes he or she can accomplish a certain goal, the more energy that person invests in doing it. Beliefs, in turn, need strategies. Strategies are effected by values. If they do not agree, the person begins to undermine self success because of the internal conflict between what the person internally values and a strategy that person may use to achieve success in the goal set for self. For the believer, positive values when consciously internalized, lead to moral healing. Moral healing is another term for the greater struggle where reason and the passions battle within for the attention of the heart. Prescribed fasting enhances the possibility of reason succeeding and morally healing by lessening the energies of the passions as pointed out in the article by Laleh Bakhtiar.

While believers spend eleven months of the year oriented towards this world, emphasis in this one month a year is towards the spiritual. The dangers of too much attachment to this world are pointed out by Muhammad al-Ghazzali. Although he wrote some 800 years ago, his words are as relevant today as if they had been written now. Attachment to this world to an extent which goes beyond moderation holds the believer back from serving God and His creatures because excessive attachment to the world increases the passions (lust and anger) and reduces the possibility of the eternal preservation of self.

With a de-emphasis on this world, at least one month a year, prescribed fasting takes on the quality of what might be called "spiritual fasting" as described in an article by Muhyiddin Abdul Qadir Gilani, one of the great Sufi masters. Having morally healed to a certain extent by accepting the command to perform the prescribed fast and actually fasting, the believer is led towards a desire to extend the fasting beyond what is prescribed, to work overtime in a sense. As the Shaykh points out, all of the senses of hearing, seeing and touching should also fast along with that of tasting and smelling.

Energizers

The final aspect of process which is considered in this collection is that of being an energizer. Nothing happens without a source of energy. The more energy a person has, the more vibrancy he or she has. While it is usually thought that if a person eats better food, that person will have more energy, and this is true to some extent, there is also a qualitative energy which comes from spiritual practices which cannot be measured in the usual sense. Its presence can only be known through the resulting actions.

"The Therapeutics of Prescribed Fasting" are discussed by a practicing physician, Shahid Athar. Practical suggestions are given along with the medical benefits of fasting. The article "Medical Benefits of Fasting," by Dr. Ebrahim Kazim, show the medical implications to the body of prescribed fasting. Dreams are yet another source of energy although less considered as so simply because we do not clearly understand their effects. What is known is that they arise from our unconscious state and the traditional interpretations of dreams about fasting as recorded by Ibn Sirin and translated by Muhammad al-Akili prove most interesting reading. Ramadan recipes by Shabnam Zaman brings the reader back to the world of food and how various cultures follow different patterns in the pre-dawn meal and the daily ending of the fast. Living in a world that puts such emphasis on material consumption, recalling how a believer can do so much with so little is food for thought.

Human Bonding

Finally, the last two parts, Human Bonding and Mastering Communication are aspects of action—proof of the extent of transformation through attaining the goal and having performed the prescribed fast. The power to bond with others is an extraordinary human power. It comes in the true sense when bonding develops from the heart and not from either the intellect or the passions. It comes from a deep love for one's fellow

human being and arises when a person tries to meet the needs of others before his or her own needs, much like a mother with her new born child.

Here a reader might ask if the strategies have worked reinforcing the goals and beliefs. The first article in this section, "Ramadan and Interfaith Bonding," by Shahid Athar is a good example of the transformed spirit at work putting forth energies to bond with others. He cites examples of interfaith meetings in the Indianapolis area which have had a positive effect on the community.

M. A. Choudhery looks at fasting from the historic perspective showing how the concept of fasting has existed among many peoples in the past. She then compares and contrasts the various reasons behind the religious practice of fasting, the motive behind the prescribed fast being the ability to grow closer to God and not because of sorrow for a calamity or atonement for wrongdoing. Through this historical development, prescribed fasting has now become a means of positive bonding with God.

Master Communicators

Believers should conceivably be master communicators on all three levels—with self, with others and with the Source. How they communicate determines the quality of their lives. Through spiritual disciplines like prescribed fasting, believers are given an opportunity, a challenge. If they are able to communicate that challenge to themselves successfully, they will find the ability to change. This is not to accept prescribed fasting as only a religious duty but rather as a divine challenge, as a chance for growth instead of an experience which limits self. In this way they will become master communicators because their very life will communicate their vision, goal and beliefs to others to help them change for the better, as well.

Traditional methods to master communication with the Source as well as with other people are multiple during the month of the prescribed fast. Tariq Butt summarizes them in his article "Utilizing Ramadan to Communicate." An article on each traditional method of fostering communication follows his essay including "The Special Night Prayer (*tarawih*) of

Ramadan" by Muhammad Aslam, "Retreat to a Mosque (*i'tikaf*) by Muhammad Zakariyya Kandhlawi, "The Night of Power" by Seyyid Qutb, "The Poor-due of Ramadan" by Navid Hanif and "The Festival: Suggestions for School Celebrations by Ismat Bano Siddiqi.

Ramadan is considered by believers to be a blessed month because in it previous scriptures were said to have been revealed as well as the Quran. As the Islamic calendar is based on the moon, the month is celebrated ten days before the preceding year except in leap years when it comes eleven days sooner. It is a month when believers renew their covenant with the Creator through prescribed fasting and prayers as well as the special night prayer of Ramadan said in congregation. There is also a retreat to the mosque during the last ten days of the month where the believer remains in the mosque fasting during the day, performing the prescribed prayers and supplicating throughout the day and night. The retreat is traditionally said to anticipate the Night of Power, the night which is better than 1000 months. Finally, at the end of the month, each believer pays the poor-due which is then given to the poor and needy. The month ends with a Festival where the entire community gathers to share in celebration with each other.

Prescribed fasting, then, motivates believers to action. The action may be manifested as either an enthusiastic audience to the spiritual disciplines of other faiths or as a practitioner of this faith in particular. For the practitioner, the first stage is to make the prescribed fast a goal and then to believe that he or she can do it. Strategies like prescribed prayers, supplications, recitation of the Quran, remembrance of God help make the goal a reality. Believers who are clear on their values and what is most important to them in their life allow their reason to rule over their passions. Believers seek out the necessary material and spiritual energies to be able to work toward their goal, bonding with others of the same and different faiths, looking for commonalties and differences. They then practice as master communicators at all three levels through the same means God communicates to them.

Part One:
Goal-Setters